



UNDER A RULE AND A SUPERIOR CONVERSATIO FOR SANCTIFICATION

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I would like to begin with an experience that brought to life this topic for me. About two years ago at the funeral vigil of one of our sisters, as I saw the coffin in the middle of the church, covered by the white pall, with the *Rule of Benedict* resting on top of it, and the superior standing alone in front of the altar at the head of the coffin, it seemed to me a perfect symbol of the fact that we live under a rule and a superior...our whole life from the beginning of religious life until death. The superior spoke of her last meeting with this sister who had been "honed by suffering" in her last illness, and she said it was as if she were all light. She had lived a particular way of life in our community, under a rule and a superior, and it had brought her to holiness.

There are many discussions about the meaning of the word *conversatio*,¹ but without going into details, I will simply say that I am taking it to mean the way of life we take on when we vow stability, conversion of life and obedience. It is the way Benedict uses the word in the Prologue 49: "As we progress in this way of life (*conversatio*) and in faith..., " or in the last chapter of the *Rule*: "The reason we have written this rule is that, by observing it in monasteries, we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life (*conversatio*). And for anyone hastening on to the perfection of monastic life (*conversatio*), there are the teachings of the holy Fathers" (*RB* 73:1-2).

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The notion of *conversatio morum* as one of the three traditional Benedictine vows, is translated in *RB* 1980 as fidelity to monastic life. There is then a suggestion of external practices that through being observed, eventually lead to inner transformation that is holiness. It is the notion of a process, a way of life that will lead us to holiness.

And in what sense do I mean holiness? I suspect that the way I would think about it would fit very much with how the word Sanctification is seen in the Methodist tradition. It is a gift, the work of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Christ in us, the remaking of our lives according to the pattern of Christ, the transformation of ourselves into Christ's likeness. Holiness is in fact perfect love, and this is of course the work of the Holy Spirit, to spread love abroad in one's heart.

This is to be the perfect man to be sanctified throughout, to have a heart so all flaming with the love of God as continually to offer up every thought, word and work as a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God through Christ (Wesley X 1.384).

And again,

So it is, that love, entire love, is the point on which all the lines of our holy religion centres. This is the very happiness which Christ lived and died to establish among us.... In our love of God alone, therefore can we find fullness of life which he revealed and offered us in Christ. As he alone merits our love, so he alone rewards its faithfulness with happiness.²

This concept would be very familiar to Benedictines who so often read and quote the Prologue 49. "But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love." Or the end of chapter 7: "Now therefore, after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear. Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now, cleansed of vices and sins" (*RB* 7:67-70).

We believe we have a way of life that can and does lead us to this perfect love. In this paper I will refer to a particular aspect of this way of life, a rather all-embracing one. This is that we live under a rule and an abbot. (I have used the word superior, which I know is not a good word, but is inclusive, gender wise as well as for a community like my own which is not a traditional abbey in the European sense, or even in the American sense. We were founded in Australia by an English Benedictine from Downside, Archbishop Polding, and since he wanted us to be not enclosed in this needy Australian land, he adapted the *Rule of Benedict* for us and called us Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St. Benedict.)

What I am discussing of course, is the role of obedience and authority in our lives, and the place that these have in our quest for holiness. I will do this by first looking at the question of Obedience and the Word of God, then Mutual Obedience, obedience to each other in community. Then in this context, I will discuss Obedience and the *Rule* and Obedience and the Superior.

OBEDIENCE AND THE GOSPEL

In another oft-quoted passage from the Prologue, after the call to live this way of life has been described, Benedict uses the phrase, "...let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide," (Prologue 21).

Basic to every significant aspect of Benedictine life is its ultimate grounding in the Gospel. The Gospel is the source of Benedict's vision.³

If one never knew this before, or at least knew the extent of it, it was an interesting experience to first pick up the text we call *RB 1980*, the new translation of the *Rule of Benedict*, published in that year, and to see the scripture texts within the *Rule* printed in italics, together with the references. There seems to be at times more italics than text in another style. Benedict was steeped in the word of God, and so too do we have to be. Is not every page of every book of the Old and New Testaments the truest of guides for human life? (*RB 73:3*)

This is very evident in the way of life that is proposed for us in chapter 4, *The Tools for Good Works*, where the Gospel teaching is spelt out so clearly. The gospel gives individuals and communities meaning and purpose.

In a *Rule* that begins with the word *Listen*, and speaks of *attending* "with the ear of your heart," we surely have a way of life that invites us as disciples, learners, to listen closely to the word of God with every fibre of our being.⁴ The word *listen*, is from the same root as the word *obedience*, and each person is called to take time and to make listening to the word of God central in his/her life. I believe that it is only through constant fidelity to this listening that we can ever be transformed by the love of God, and then in our living be able to be obedient. It is through this that all can be judged in the light of that word, and that all our actions can be informed by it.

I do not want to over emphasize obedience in its individual ascetical elements, though this aspect is there in Benedict out of the tradition that flows from the *Rule of the Master*. Yet I believe that it is in our individual lives, and in a disciplined way, in faithfully, daily, listening to the word of God in our personal and communal prayer, that we will deepen our understanding of what God wants of us, and therefore of what obedience is for us. Only then, can we be faithful in the community dimension.

We have been called to discipleship, to follow and to listen, and we have to be obedient to Christ and with Christ. Jesus' life was a listening-in-process.⁵ It is never just trying to find the will of God for which there is a blueprint held by God. It is a process of waiting and not being sure, and that means that we must absolutely trust God who will lead us as disciples to holiness.

In this era of our religious lives we speak so easily of discernment. I have wondered how this will ever work properly if we are not all convinced what depths and effort this demands from each of us, as we ponder God's word. It is never simple to know and seek the will of God. We are so easily prone to self-will and delusion, and we often lack the deep intimacy with God that can make us surer in our search. That is why I am so convinced that we, like Benedict must be steeped in the word of God. We must seek God's will in the depths of our hearts, and then because we have chosen to live in a community, we must also see how God's will is mediated for us in the

way of life we live and the events of our lives, through our communities, our rule and our superior. We will never recognize this will however, unless we are in a process of being transformed by the word of God. Our constitutions express this insight thus:

All sisters are called to recognize that formation is a life-long process, and to allow themselves to be formed in gospel living by their vigilance in listening to the Word and their commitment to our corporate life. (Const. 6.3)

Benedict calls us to return to God by the labour of obedience (Prologue 2), and we must never forget that it is a labour, in relation to our fidelity to listening to God's word as well as in all other aspects of our obedience. If we are to be identified with Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, we are called to be identified with the suffering of Christ. This is not a life of comfort and complacency. It is a living out of the call to renounce ourselves in order to follow Christ. It is a challenge to understand these words, *A painless theology of obedience is a false one.*⁶

We express some of these ideas in our constitutions in the following ways:

The Word of God, listened to in the Scriptures and in our life, celebrated in liturgy, accepted and obeyed in faith, and responded to in the signs of the times, gives unity and vitality to our community life. (3.2)

So the promise and hope is, that as we are transformed by constant listening to the word of God, we become

strong and obedient disciples of Benedict...like the maturing disciples of Jesus in the Gospels, themselves good news incarnate, heralding the reign of God. We are ever being sent, going out to serve as messengers of the word of God.⁷

And indeed we do not do this only as individuals, but as members of a community.

OBEDIENCE TO EACH OTHER IN COMMUNITY

Another experience to relate, one that has led to us as a community realizing the value of what Benedict teaches about the role of obedience in the community—we live in small groups which are our local communities, and we are spread over a large part of Australia. Until just over six years ago we lived with a person appointed as a local superior, responsible for one community or a grouping of communities. At the General chapter of 1987 a decision was made not to continue this. I believe that this helped us (not without pain) to understand two things—the fact that we have one superior, and secondly in our daily living that we are mutually responsible for our lives together, and that we have to listen and be obedient to each other. It is that latter point that I want to develop in this section.

This aspect is expressed very frequently in our constitutions, and I can only use a sample:

Our seeking of God is not simply an individual reality but is lived out in a community of persons united in Christ, attentive to his Word, and mutually dependent on one another in responding to his call. (5.2)

By practising mutual obedience and service, holding all things in common, bearing one another's burdens and supporting and encouraging one another, we experience and express in community the love of Christ. (3.4)

Here is the word of mutual obedience, obedience and listening one to another in a community. Our living with each other in the joy, as well as in the demands, of mutual obedience leads to great freedom and fullness of life. There comes a sense of being responsible, working together with a group towards common ideals, the putting aside of self demanded by this, the living with the basic attitudes of respect, support, forgiveness, real love and service. Through this we discover that love costs, that it is not just a matter of living together, but of living out of the same reservoir of values and the same centre of love.⁸ To do this well demands a great maturity.

The way of life we live leads us not just as individuals to holiness, but as a whole community. We lose our life for the sake of the Gospel and then find our real self in God—fullness of life. The quality of our interactions with each other enrich us. We do not blame the past, or others or circumstances when difficulties arise; we do not run away, but know that real life is found in the present situation.⁹ And again we are reminded that this requires the labour of obedience, and indeed it is the basis and the need for our vow of stability, *staying with* the sisters with whom we live.

Scholars remind us that the more "vertical" approach of Obedience in the earlier chapters of the *Rule* gradually gives way in the later chapters to an acknowledgement that obedience is exercised in a community and to one another. Even though many would not respond well to chapter 63, "Community Rank," or to the notions of rank in chapter 71 on "Mutual Obedience," it seems obvious to me that order and rank are ways that Benedict sees of not disturbing the flock, or of seeing that no one will be disturbed in the house of God. Within those chapters there are many expressions of mutual obedience and love: "The younger monks, then, must respect their seniors, and the seniors must love the juniors" (RB 63.10).

The clearest expression of mutual obedience is at the opening of chapter 71 "Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know it is by this way of obedience that we go to God" (RB 71.1). We may not want to accept the ritual way in which a monk is to ask for forgiveness. If a monk is reproved in any way by his abbot or by one of his seniors, even for some very small matter, or if he gets the impression that one of his seniors is angry or disturbed with him, however slightly, he must then and there without delay, cast himself on the ground at the other's feet to make satisfaction, and lie there until the disturbance is calmed by a blessing (RB 71.8). However, if this ritual is not effective in this age, it behooves us to find others that are so, ways of seeking and showing forgiveness, in the communion of disciples that is still learning, still finding its way, still making mistakes, as it is still being transformed into a community, into *koinonia*.

The Good Zeal of chapter 72 sums up what mutual obedience means. It is a challenging framework and a gospel call for us in our lives together:

This then is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting one

another's weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God loving fear, to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life. (*RB* 72.3-11)

To live like this is no doubt to live a way of life that leads to holiness.

OBEDIENCE TO THE RULE

When Benedict is describing the different kinds of monks in chapter 1, he speaks first of the cenobites, those who belong to a monastery where they serve under a rule and an abbot (*RB* 1.2). In the same chapter he speaks of the Sarabaites, the most detestable kind of monks, "who with no experience to guide them, no rule to try them as gold is tried in a furnace, have a character as soft as lead...." Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden (*RB* 1.6-9).

In the prologue, Benedict relates the written prescriptions that are to be made, to the establishment of the school for the Lord's service. "Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome" (Prologue 45-46). This seems a very gentle approach to the notion of rule. In the description of the cenobites as those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot, the word *regula* is used: *militans sub regula vel abbate*. This has something of the notion of struggle or battle. Here there is a sense that if we give ourselves to a particular way of living, a discipline where we learn, we will become worthy followers of Christ. I would tend to think of the *sub regula* more in the sense that we stand under it and hence will come to understand.

However, whichever way it is interpreted, it is obvious that the *Rule* was simply a plan for life for those who are in the school for the Lord's service. It is nearer to a set of principles than what we have come to expect rule or law to mean. The word *regula* could mean a guidepost or railing, something to hang on to in the dark, something that leads in a given direction, something that points out the road, something that gives us support as we climb. It is not a list of directives, but a way of life.¹⁰

Parts of the *Rule* are in the genre of Wisdom literature. Benedict sets the tone of his work by the Prologue, borrowed almost completely from the *Rule of the Master*, and this is set in the Wisdom mode. This of course has implications for its interpretation. It then contains principles and attitudes that are a particular way of interpreting a gospel way of living. It is part of a living tradition, and is never meant to be lived literally in all its aspects.

Part of the value of studying the *Rule* is that it does present us with an alternative view that at times will jolt us out of our complacency in a different era. Obedience demands that we pay attention to these challenges. The *Rule* acts on our minds and hearts. It plays a special part for those who live in the tradition because we have a sort of family access to it.¹¹ It is like heart speaking to heart. Through paying attention to it

we will develop a *monastic heart* ourselves.¹² In the same way that listening to (and obeying) the word of God in Scripture will transform our hearts into the heart of Christ, so will pondering the *Rule of Benedict*, transform us into those who hold dear the great Benedictine values. It is in this sense that obedience to the rule is demanded of us.

Our way of life is also expressed by Constitutions which express in livable ways the principles of the Benedictine way of life. The opening of our Constitutions express this well.

This statement of our way of life does not stand by itself. It draws its vitality from the basic document in our tradition, the *Rule of Benedict*, and from the Rules of Polding by which the tradition is interpreted to give us our particular character and mission.

Together with the Statutes, the Acts of the General Chapter and the Chapter Handbook, these Constitutions form the laws of the congregations which provide for us a framework for living the gospel in fidelity to our charism.

OBEDIENCE TO A SUPERIOR

We have spoken of obedience to the word of God, to the community, to the rule, and now we come to the role of the superior. Our constitutions express it thus:

We elect a sister who is seen to embody the spirit of the congregation and ask her to serve us as our superior, holding the place of Christ in the community as leader and teacher. The service of authority which she offers to the community leads us forward in our way of life and in faith (7.4).

Benedict speaks of the Superior in tandem with the *Rule* in chapter 1. The cenobites are those who live in a monastery and serve under a rule and an abbot. (Here are the three pillars of the Benedictine community, community, rule and abbot). Chapter 5 speaks of those who choose to live in monasteries and to have an abbot over them. This chapter is devoted to the nature of the obedience we offer to the one who is chosen as abbot. It is unhesitating obedience (*RB* 5.1), it is a ready step of obedience (*RB* 5.7), it is based on love (*RB* 5.10), it is conforming to the Lord who said, "I came not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (*RB* 5.13), and it must be done without grumbling, even in the heart (*RB* 5.17). Is this the kind of obedience that is asked of us in this day of consultation, participation, personal responsibility? It seems to me these are crucial questions.

Tomes have been written on the role of the abbot and here it will only be possible to make a few points.

For those who live in the Benedictine tradition it is obvious that the abbot or superior plays a central role. He or she is the one single ultimate authority. As every commentator would note, the place that Benedict gives the abbot in the *Rule* signifies this. There are two full chapters dealing with the abbot, and many other chapters that note

his role in so many of the daily functions of the community. He is mentioned in the *Rule* 126 times.

The abbot and prioress are the centre of the community in Benedictine spirituality. They are the one voice, the one light, the one heart that the entire community can trust to act always in its true and total interest.¹³

Benedict speaks in Chapter 2, *The Qualities of the Abbot*, of the abbot as the one who "is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since he is addressed by a title of Christ" (*RB* 2.2). This title is Christ as Father which was commonly used in earlier literature. The abbot holds the place of Christ.

He acts in the place of Christ in the sense that he first allows himself to be saturated in the teaching of Christ, totally dedicated to seeking out and implementing the will of God....

The abbot's task is to act in Christ's place, to imitate his way of life and to mediate his presence and teaching to the members of the community.¹⁴

A Benedictine community cannot be merely about leadership. There has been a kind of reaction to the use of the word authority because of the authoritarianism that many religious experienced. But we need to reclaim the word. The source of authority in the community is the Spirit, and in a sense all of course share in it. However, we ask someone to accept the role of abbot or superior in the community, and thence he or she has been given authority to carry out this role, and will be seen to be exercising this authority.

Leadership is a gift given to many, and it is an enduring gift, not assumed for a certain time and laid down at the end of a mandate. It is found in many spheres other than government and it exists apart from authority. Religious authority is given to the person elected as superior in order for the goals of the congregation to be achieved, for the spread of the gospel and for the growth and service of the sisters.¹⁵ Power, the much misunderstood word is part of this and is used as service for the sake of the mission. Authority is given for a specified time to those elected or appointed. Of course it would be hoped that leadership would be a gift that such a person would possess, but the two things are not synonymous and not interchangeable. Authority is a faith reality, and because of this obedience is the response.

The question asked above as to how this fits into modern terms of sharing and participation and responsibility has to be seen in the light of the process of giving and taking of counsel. Chapter 3 of the *Rule*, "Summoning the Community for Counsel," is often very well accepted because it acknowledges that the abbot must always listen to the community on important matters. The chapter (total community) is the basic reality, and to this total community the abbot must listen. Chapter 2 has also stated that the abbot has to be responsible, must always be aware of the needs of the community, and chapter 64 repeats these ideas and speaks of him as needing to be discerning and moderate. He too must keep the rule in every particular.

The giving and taking of counsel is the central mode of governance in a

Benedictine community, and we have to believe in the desire and the ability of the superior to listen. However, in the end it is hers/his to decide, and the decision may not necessarily be what each member thought best. The superior may share the burdens, but she does not simply delegate them. "To share authority is not to give it away."¹⁶

We are speaking of the fact that we live under a superior, and the surety we then have in this way of life that we live, is that the superior will help to unite us in Christ, will give direction to our corporate life and will call us to continuing growth in response to the Spirit. She will teach by word and example (*RB* 2.11), and in short, lead us individually and communally into a mature response to God's word in our lives. To live under a rule and a superior is indeed a way of life that leads to holiness. The superior has to listen with the ear of her heart, and so does the community.

We have to keep studying our heritage, and keep trying to ask what it all means for us here and now. It is too precious to lose, and I was struck by a poem of Anne Udy's that is published in the book *Dig or Die*, a collection of papers given at the Wesley Heritage Conference, Sydney 1980.¹⁷ With that I would like to end.

HERITAGE

We are not self-sufficient, all brand new.

We cannot struggle across here and now without the treasures others buried with care in caskets burnished by long forgotten hands. We cannot light our beacon in the dark until we find beneath time's dust a hoard where potent resource waits discovery.

We will fall short, collapse before the end unless we dig with strength and, having found, reshape fashioning from ancient gems, jewels for today.

—Anne B. Udy.

NOTES

1. Terrence Kardong, *Benedictines Glazier* (Wilmington 1988). There is a particularly clear discussion of this on pp. 94-98.
2. Quoted in J. Udy, *Dig or Die* (Sydney: World Methodist Historical Society, 1981), pp. 24-25.
3. M. Collins, *Rule and Gospel: The Meaning of Benedictine Vowing* (Benedictines 1980), 25:2 and 33.
4. E. De Waal, *Seeking God* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1984), p. 42.
5. B. Fiand, *Living the Vision* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 123.
6. F. Moloney, *A Life of Promise* (Sydney: St. Paul, 1986), p. 162.
7. Collins, *Rule and Gospel*, p. 44.
8. J. Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 40.
9. L. Boff, *Witnesses in the Heart of the World* (Chicago: Claret Resources, 1981), p. 140.
10. Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled*, p. 7.
11. M. Casey, *Benedictine Studies* (Unpublished Material Unit 01).
12. T. Kardong, *Together Unto Life Everlasting* (North Dakota: Assumption Abbey Press, 1984), p. 10.
13. J. Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 169.
14. Casey, *Benedictine Studies*, Unit 02.

15. M. Linscott, "Leadership, Authority and Religious Government," *Review for Religious*, 52:2 (1993), pp. 188-90.
16. Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled*, p. 91.
17. A. Udy, *Dig or Die*, p. 5.